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ABSTRACT

Retaining students in New York City public schools is an intensely debated issue. Each year an increasing number of students are retained in grade. The objective of this paper is to analyze the New York City Board of Education promotion policy as a way to assess whether and how it is being implemented. Current research and a teacher-made survey are utilized as means to examine retention as an effective resource for failing students. Additionally, alternative measures that may best serve students who are in need of academic assistance are explored. Intervention service as an alternative to retention is suggested as an effective method for dealing with the problem, as supported by the literature and survey. (Contains an outline of New York City Board of Education Chancellor's Regulation on promotion policies; a statistical representation of the New York City Board of Education Promotion Standards, grades 3-12; eight survey questions; summaries of survey questions, including a list of concerns and recommendations; and 11 references.) (Author/WFA)

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Retention Issues and Policy
Kathy Rosado

Abstract

Retaining students in New York City Public Schools is an intensely debated issue. Each year an increasing number of students are retained. The objective of this paper is to analyze the New York City Board of Education Promotion Policy as a way to assess if and how it is being implemented. Current research and a teacher made survey are utilized as a means to examine retention as an effective resource for failing students. Additionally, alternative measures that may best serve students who are in need of academic assistance are explored. Intervention service as an alternative to retention is suggested as an effective method for dealing with the problem as supported by the literature and survey.

Introduction

The first year of teaching presented its own set of difficulties but as the year progressed none were as insurmountable as the problems arising out of the retaining of students. The many behavioral issues that presented themselves arose directly as a result of retention. The policies that govern holdovers do not take into account the effect of this decision on the student psyche. Students seem to take a persona not necessarily their own but one that closely resembles the taunts made by undiscerning siblings, parents and especially their peers who have moved on. The behavior suggests that these students often feel trapped and may rebel as a source of frustration, embarrassment or just out of sheer confusion. The predicament they find themselves in is not a welcome one. They seem uncomfortable, they try to fit in but other students often rebuff them. They feel incompetent during lessons, they are aware that they have not mastered certain skills but lack the motivation or understanding as to their role in acquiring these skills.

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There are numerous episodes of teasing, bullying by those held over but most difficult and saddening of the issues is the frustration these students experience as they are unable to fight their insecurities arising from being held over and shift the focus to their academic development. This ability to motivate oneself is rarely learned at this early age and because of the educational mores or social expectation it becomes difficult for the teacher to reverse the damage that has already been done. In my experience it appeared that students held over in a grade were no more able to meet academic standards at the end of the second year than they were at the end of the first. There appears to be a flaw in the system, which does not take into account the age and coping ability of students held over. The retaining students for hold over especially in the early grades needs to be re-addressed.

There are also disadvantages for those students entering a grade for the first time. This early transition into a successful school experience is hindered by competition from older school savvy students. The responses are varied but the age differences between the groups often heighten the tension in the classroom. Age differences during the early ages are pronounced; differences in development of a child even six months older than another are monumental. It thus becomes critical for educators to recognize these hurdles when criteria for evaluation and testing in the early grades are developed. Teachers need to be prepared to anticipate these hurdles and have tailor made curriculum to address the needs of both groups since retention affects both groups, phenomenally.

The objective of this paper is to analyze current retention policies of the New York City Board of Education by examining research on the issue, and evaluating the responses to a teacher survey.

Political and Historical Perspectives on Retention

The organization of schools by grades in the early nineteenth century led to institution of specific requirements for promotion. Students were prohibited from moving ahead to another grade without meeting the required standards that merited promotion (Webb and Bunten, 1988).

The Depression of the 1930's found a new perspective on students' academic performance since many were unable to pass basic competency test. Schools became concerned about student morale and the potential drop out rate. They began considering the age and maturity of the student as criteria for promotion (Webb and Bunten 1988). Social promotion – the approach where students are grouped according to age and are promoted with their peers into each successive grade was instituted (Steiner, 1986).

In recent years a renewed interest in promotion policies have occurred, due in part to the failure students to achieve basic academic competencies skills before graduating high school (Webb and Bunten 1988). Each state has therefore been encouraged to develop guidelines for student promotion, these policy guidelines are outlined by the board of education in each state. As a result many schools have returned to the concept of promotion based on mastery of grade level skills (Steiner, 1986).

There has been much political discussion about education. President Clinton in his 1998 State of the Union Address stated, " When we promote a child from grade to grade who hasn't mastered the work, we don't do that child any favors. It is time to end social promotion in America's school". Recently President Bush has advanced the "No Child Left Behind Act". There is little indication as to how these policies will be implemented and how the problems in education will be solved. Schools, parents and students retained

are all ready for reform that will work. While funding is necessary to improve education overall, there need to be clear cut policies which describes action necessary to ensure that students learn and do not fall through the cracks.

Many of the studies supporting retention appeared inconclusive because of the research methods employed. Researchers intent on finding solutions to the problem of retention have conducted many studies. Several have gauged the performances of promoted students against those retained. This becomes an inherently a faulty method since these two groups differ greatly. Students who are meeting promotional standards cannot be included in a study that aims to benefit students who are retained.

There has been a failure in policy guidelines historically and currently to acknowledge other reasons for students' academic failures. Many of the failures often seem to arise from the environment in which the child finds him or herself. Research and policy does not include other facets affecting student progress that may be relevant like environmental and emotional issues such as poverty or neglect. There is a necessity for a study that selects randomly retained students or students experiencing academic setbacks and observe their progress in a specific classroom environment. This requires assigning students to a specialized classroom targeting their academic needs. This idea would be supported by many, since inconclusive research give way to "promotion policies ...likely based on social values and philosophical orientations (Labaree, 1983), rather than the true needs of the child. Following these recommendations will bring the educational system closer to the ideal that "No Student Is Left Behind".

New York City Board Of Education Policies

The New York City Board of Education – Chancellor's Regulation on promotion policies for all students in Pre-kindergarten through grade 12 outlines the responsibility of the Chancellor, School Districts, Schools, Parent and Students. The policy which went into effect on October 14, 1999 states-

The Chancellor will:

1. Define system-wide performance standards in the academic content areas.
2. Establish system-wide assessments to measure student progress.
3. Supervise and evaluate the implementation of the policy in all districts and schools.

School Districts/ Superintendents will:

1. Specifically address the implementation of the promotion standards in their District Comprehension Education Plans (DCEPs).
2. The DCEPs will provide schools with guidance of procedures for parent notification, analysis of student assessment, the development of instructional strategies and intervention programs for students who are not meeting promotion standards. Professional development targeted to said areas will be provided to all school leadership and staff.
3. Supervise and monitor implementation of this policy.

Principals will:

1. In cooperation with School Leadership teams will produce Comprehensive Education Plans (CEPs) that will focus on enabling all students meet or exceed the established performance standards. The CEP will specify intervention programs and strategies for students not achieving performance standards for promotion, include a plan that ensure that parents are partners in their children's learning, and create timelines and benchmarks for determining student progress. The CEP will also specify an attendance plan that will outline early identification, parent notification, outreach and support in an attendance program. Professional development must be provided to all staff in these areas.
2. Implement and monitor promotion standards and supervise teachers to ensure effective instruction is provided to all students not meeting promotion standards.

Teachers will:

1. Provide the instruction of the promotion standards specifically linked to the performance standards to all students.
2. In partnership with school-based staff and under the principal's supervision ensure that "at risk" students are provided with instructional and support interventions.
3. Use available all assessments as mechanisms to improve classroom instruction and to provide parents with specify information about their children's academic progress.

4. Maintain a collection of student work that documents student progress.

Parents will:

1. Be active partners in the education of their children. Therefore schools will communicate promotion standards as it relates to their children. Parents will also be offered the opportunity to participate in parent and family learning programs. Communication with parents should be in the home language if possible.
2. When the standards, expectations and support have been clearly communicated, be expected to support the attendance policy and the completion of student work.
3. Also be responsible for helping to maintain communication with schools and teachers about their child's progress.

Students will:

1. Be expected to work towards learning goals set for them and when necessary, based on teacher feedback and their own efforts to use available resources to bring their work up to promotion standards.
2. Be expected to engage in class work, homework and other learning based activities required to meet performance standards.
3. Maintain a standard of 90% attendance.

The examination of The New York City Board of Education Chancellor's Regulation on promotion standards yielded some interesting findings. An especially significant finding refers to the difference between the definitions of the actual policy

versus what is actually practiced in the school system. The policy gives the Chancellor the responsibility "for evaluating and supervision of this policy" which he delegates to the districts. The districts then delegate this to the principals, who further delegate it the teachers. Unfortunately most teachers are unaware of what these policies really are as highlighted in the survey conducted. Another example of this practice is that students are retained in first and second grade when the policy actually states: "early childhood grades Pre-kindergarten, Kindergarten, first and second *–are critical years in preparing students for successful achievement in later grades. Each district will implement a specific program of early intervention and enrichment, and support to prepare all students to achieve the promotion standards that begin in grade 3. Preparation of students prior to grade 3 will be based on instructional practices, strategies, and interventions established to promote literacy development. These practices will draw from the use of the Primary Literacy Standards, the Early Childhood Literacy Assessment System (ECLAS). Extended day and extended year instruction, tutoring and other activities to ensure that all students become independent readers and writers by grade 3 (*Board of Education, Chancellor's Promotion Standards, #A-501, 1999)". The policy infers that retention of students should not begin until the third grade since it states that students should be given intervention services that will assist them in meeting promotional standards that will *begin* in third grade (*Refer the charts at the conclusion of this section which illustrate that the promotion policy does not include grades k-2)*. The policy clearly outlines assessment methods for children before grade three, specifically that there will be a Pupil Personnel Team, which will provide:

- An assessment of Progress Toward Literacy, "periodic reviews to ensure that students are moving toward literacy."
- Instructional Strategies and Intervention, "interventions to promote literacy development."
- Professional Development "ongoing professional development focused on support intervention and instructional strategies."

In many schools these steps are often not implemented. There is a greater need for the Board of Education to verify, by constant monitoring, that the policies outlined for teaching literacy are being met. There also needs to be intensive professional development if the teachers are to going to successfully implement the standards in their classrooms.

In addition to the responsibility given to educators, the promotion standards name parents as being responsible for the educational well being of their children. This is a very vague statement that could be misinterpreted by some to mean that parents' attitudes could somehow contribute to their child being retained! Parents should be actively involved in the "event that promotion may be considered not in a child's best interest." Many parents however are unfamiliar with promotion policies and are often ill prepared to assist or advocate on their children's behalf. Thus as outlined in the promotion policy, *parents should be offered the opportunity to participate in parent and family learning programs, to discuss the work and progress of their children, and to play a role in their child's academic success.*

There are many other factors that need to be considered when retention is being recommended as an option for instance the learning styles of students and how they

differ. How can teachers best serve a child who is visual? One who is tactile? How can we challenge those who are bored? Education has moved away from the teacher focused setting to the student-centered model, which requires the students to take significant responsibility for their success. The policy here states *that the student will be expected to work towards accomplishing the learning goals set for them and will, when necessary, on the basis of informed feedback from their teachers and through their own efforts and use of available resources, bring their work up to standard.* The responsibility to motivate oneself to succeed often rests solely on the child who in many cases due to his home environment has few positive reinforcements to succeed. Statistically many students are failing and the policies are a clear indication of what is wrong.

A statistical representation of the New York City Board of Education Promotion Standards grades 3 through 12.

Figure 1

GRADE	**STUDENT WORK** Meet NYC Performance Standards in Language Arts and Math	***STANDARDIZED TEST*** Performance At or above Level 2 CTB-R Or State ELA*	***STANDARDIZED TEST*** Performance At or Above Level 2 CTB-M Or State Math*	***ATTENDANCE*** 90%
3	X	X	X	X
4	X	State ELA*	State Math*	X
5	X	X	X	X
6	X	X	X	X
7	X	X	X	X

Figure 2

GRADE	*STUDENT WORK* Meet NYC Performance Standards in Language Arts, Math and Science	***STANDARDIZED TEST*** Performance At or Above Level 2 State ELA	***STANDARDIZED TEST*** Performance At or Above Level 2 State Math	***GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS***	**ATTENDANCE** 90%
8 AND 8+	X	X	X	X	X

Figure 3

GRADE	***COURSEWORK/ EXAMS***	***MINIMUM CREDITS***	***ATTENDANCE 90%***
9	Successful completion of standards in academic subjects	8	X
10	Meet NYC Performance Standards in Language Arts, Math and Science	20 Including 4 in English and or ESL and 4 in Social Studies	X
11	Successful completion of standards in academic subject areas	28	X
12	Passing Grade in 5 Regents Exams English, Math, Global Studies, U.S. Studies and Science	40	X
12+	Passing Grade in 5 Regents Exams English, Math, Global Studies, U.S. Studies and Science	40	X

Research On The Issue

The National Research Council 1998 reports that some 15% of American students have been retained at least once. This equates to about 7 million students. Hence the New York City Board of Education is not the only board plagued by this problem. The question that arises now deals with the effectiveness of retention as a strategy to aid

failing students. What effect does retention have on the failing student? What have researchers found that could augment retention policies in New York City? This section serves to analyze research in an effort to answer the questions posed. Although the New York City Board of Education Promotion Policies is a good policy observing what works in other states can serve as a helpful comparison.

Thompson and Cunningham (2000) have reported that neither social promotion nor retention leads to higher performance in students whom are academically challenged. They advocated that the goal of states should be allowances to bring low performing or failing students up to higher standards. This position also found favor with other researchers specifically David Denton the author of an independent study by the State Department on Education of South Carolina (Denton is also a director of a school readiness and reading program at the Southern Regional Education Board). In a summary of several studies found that retention was costly and ineffective and at times harmful to students. He states conclusively, "After decades of retaining students we know beyond any serious doubt that repeating a grade does not help students overcome their problems (South Carolina Department of Education, 2001)."

Monty Neill executive director of FairTest a Cambridge, Massachusetts, testing reform advocacy group stated that retention does not work. Research has found that it increases dropout rates (Dunne, 2000). On the other side of the continuum retention proponents argue that promoted students are frustrated when they cannot do the work and send the message that students can get by without exerting themselves. Teachers try to teach two different groups while dealing with students unprepared for challenges of the classroom. Eventually they neglect one group or the other. Those neglected are finally

dumped onto a society unprepared for challenges they would confront (Cunningham, Thompson, 2000).

Students are affected. Studies support the idea that retention discourages students whose motivation is already questionable (Cunningham, Thompson 2000). Students who are academically challenged feel inadequate among peers. Students flourish when they believe they can succeed. Usually success is learned. When a student is in an environment that supports learning, the student will be invigorated and will take learning seriously. However if the opposite is true students will falter in motivation and confidence. Educators and parents must find viable ways to instill confidence in students who are not achieving. In the early grades granted the focus should be on acquiring skills necessary for learning. However the curriculum should include strategies for enrichment and a variety of confidence boosters. Robertson (1997) discussing when retention may be valid recommends that parents must become advocates for their child since the negative aspects of retention far outweigh the positives. The National Association of School Psychologists agrees that retention is basically negative. It is noteworthy that several of the nations schools are experiencing these problems that stem mainly from neglect and shifting culpability from teacher to parent to system. These problems needs to be addressed The National Association of School Psychologists notes that:

- *Contrary to popular belief most students do not catch up.*
- *Students who do make progress often fall behind in later grades.*
- *Students retained have a tendency to dislike school, become aggressive, and suffer from inferiority complexes more often compared to students not retained* (Robertson, 1997).

According to Dianne Weaver high stakes testing in Louisiana will result in the retention of approximately one-third percentage of its students from the fourth and fifth grades. She quotes Scott Norton Director of Standards of the Louisiana Department of Education as saying that high stakes testing was is a component of their efforts to reform education. Norton indicated that this program includes rigorous changes in content, assessment and a new accountability program for schools and districts within the state. Teachers would then use these guidelines to review student achievement assigning low achievers to a particular grade where the discrepancies will be met by tutoring and small-group instruction.

In the year 1998 teachers in Union Elementary School in Cleveland Ohio put together a student tracking and intervention program that provided help for students starting at first grade. Presently students who make little progress are tested to determine whether intervention is necessary for specialized assistance in reading instruction (Spector 2000).

Denton stated that school boards should make certain that the quality of teaching is high in every classroom. This would call for intensive monitoring and reporting on teacher training. He also advocates efforts to prepare young children in preschool programs that should receive government funding, aiming at the reduction of class size. Roberston, in her article gives valuable advice to parents by highlighting several solutions as alternatives to retention namely:

- *Individualized Instruction*
- *Tutoring and small class size.*
- *Alternative educational settings*

- *Guidance and Counseling*
- *Delayed Achievement Testing*
- *Early Intervention*

Early intervention seemed to be the consensus among researchers as a solution to retention (Portner, 1997). Research indicates that retention alone cannot solve students' academic deficits. Education must become a common goal fostered by the school and the home environment. When one or both are found lacking the student suffers. It is true that motivation among retained students is low. However effective policies and systems should be in place to monitor student motivation and progress regularly. If monitoring is periodic then students facing difficulty in mastering skills will be promptly recognized and the appropriate help will be given.

Survey Results

A survey was conducted among classroom teachers of a New York City elementary school. The teachers were asked to evaluate the current retention policies and to examine these policies based on their experience with retained students. There was a 74% response overall. The survey findings recorded below indicate varying attitudes toward retention.

Teacher's Responses

1. *Are you familiar with the New York City Board of Education promotion/ retention policy Volume – Update NO.A-501, 1999-2000? (Check yes only if you have read it).*
   ( )Yes, ( )No, ( ) Somewhat.

75% of the teachers surveyed stated that they had not read the policy. 12.5% stated that they were somewhat familiar with the policy and another 12.5% said they had read the policy.

2. *Do you currently have students who have been retained?*

To this question 68% of the teachers responded positively. The average holdover/ retained students per class being 4.4.

3. *Overall retention is a good policy?*
Agree, Disagree, Strongly Agree or Disagree

The teachers' survey indicated that the majority of the teachers interviewed felt that retention was a good policy and helpful to students, although 20 % believed that it offered no long-term benefits to students.

4. *At what grade should schools begin retaining students? Explain. Kindergarten, First, Second, Third, Fourth or Fifth.*

Some 88% of the teachers felt that retention should begin in the lower grades- kindergarten – second. Of these, some 28 % felt that retention should begin kindergarten while 52% felt that first grade was best. About 8 % believed that the Third Grade would be ideal. Only 4% felt that second grade was a good choice to begin retaining students. However 8 % responded that students should not retained at any grade.

Although Fourth and Fifth Grade were included as possible choices for retention these were not selected as possible options for schools to begin retention. The overall consensus of the teachers seemed to favor early academic intervention including retention as the key in assisting students gain success in school. They felt that students needed to master the basic literacy standards before progressing to consecutive grades since this

would be necessary for future learning. Also, students would continue to fall behind if they did not achieve a proper foundation.

The 8% of teachers who felt that retention was ineffective commented that this lowers the self- esteem and had other detrimental effects. Suggestions made were in favor of interventions that determine specific needs of students while providing assistance tailored to meet those needs.

5. *Rank the following criteria for retention.*
1. Test Scores 2.Classroom Assessment/ Teachers' recommendation
3. Attendance.

When asked to rate the current criteria for retention, the teachers felt that classroom assessments and teacher recommendations should be the most important criteria for retention. This suggestion was based on the teachers' knowledge of the child's performance hence the teacher would have the best knowledge of the students' abilities. Attendance also played a key role in retention and was ranked second in the survey. Most suggested that the child could not learn if the child was not present at instruction time. Test scores were ranked third as a possible indicator or whether to retain or not. This, teachers suggested, was an ineffective measure of abilities, especially in the early grades since many students were not effective test takers.

6. *In your opinion, how many times should a student be retained in a grade?*
1___ 2_____ 3_____ 4. _____ As many times as necessary?

In this category 56% of teachers' surveyed said students should be retained only once. Another 28 % said as many times as necessary while another 16% did not answer this question.

7. *Rank the following strategies for assisting retained students.*
A. Mandated After- School. B. School Assessment and delivery of targeted services. C. Tutoring.

On the strategies for assisting retained students, teachers felt that assessment of students to determine deficiencies and thereafter the delivery of student targeted services, ranked highest. Tutoring was followed by mandated after school programs.

8. *Please add any additional comments and /or recommendations.*

Teachers were asked to share any recommendations, concerns or comments that they had on the topic of retention. These comments are organized into two main categories:

1) Concerns. 2) Recommendations

Concerns

- If retention were kept to a minimum, how would students be affected when promoted without having attained needed skills?
- How does mandated after school instruction affect student motivation to learn?
- How does retention affect the self -esteem of the student?
- How can teachers offer support to parents of students who are academically challenged?
- New York City's Board Of Education has a need for experienced and qualified teachers in aiding the problem of retention. Effective teachers may be able to reverse the need of retention.
- Arriving at other solutions for this problem is necessary since retention alone has not been an effective intervention for the academically challenged student.

Teacher Survey Recommendations

These are the suggested solutions proposed by the teachers surveyed.

- There must be more parental involvement and smaller groups targeted to student needs.
- There should be better assessments / evaluations to pinpoint weaknesses in students promoted once but who have not meet academic standards for promotion.
- Referrals should be done right away and attention given based on the needs of the students.
- Students should benefit from periodic one on one instruction or as often as necessary to hone skills for basic literacy and computation.
- The formation of a retention intervention classroom, which has 2 teachers or 1 experienced teacher and 1 paraprofessional. There is a suggested limit of 15 students for each intervention classroom.
- Students with behavioral issues should be separated from others taught focusing skills before being returned to regular classes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Education is a national priority and funds should be available for programs that enhance student learning. Money should be readily available for programs that evaluate and aid all, including students who are having difficulty. Unfortunately, the truth is that there are few available funds for intervention services and assessments that would indicate problem areas necessary for student-targeted instruction.

Some would say that retention serves as a band-aid on an already gangrene infested wound. Like gangrene it festers and spreads; without urgent attention it often leads to amputation. This can happen to students requiring help and receiving it too late. Students must be given an opportunity to succeed. Aggressive intervention methods are essential to establish programs necessary for the rehabilitation of failing schools and students.

Research indicates that the policies formulated seldom mirror what is actually practiced in the classroom. Further, studies clearly indicate that retention does not lead to higher performance in students who are struggling academically. The classroom is the place where learning transpires and research should reflect those differences among all students, not just one group.

Policies are written with promises that there will be funding for programs affirming that "No Child Will Be Left Behind" The sad truth is that each academic year many students continue to fall behind. The policies are seldom implemented as written and the funding even if it is available does not seem trickle down to our "village". Hence the final responsibility must stop with us as individual educators.

Individual schools must take action! These actions would include:

- Allocating funds for intervention services for students at risk.
- Creating a school based committee to evaluate current retention practices.
- Instituting an intensive school wide testing program to identify at risk students.
- Assessment and intervention services beginning at first grade for all students.
- Provide specific intervention services i.e. tutoring, small group instruction.
- Develop a tracking system for risk students to assess individual deficits.

- Intervention classrooms, with a low student- teacher ratio ultimately designed to return students to the regular classroom.

The promotion policy of the New York City Board of Education in itself does not need to be changed. However, it should be implemented. The problem with the policy is that it remains just policy. All involved in administering the guidelines of the policy should work collaboratively. Districts personnel, principals and teachers should especially work corporately in this regard. They should familiarize themselves with its contents by reading the policy in its entity, to ensure it is fully put into effect. There should also be a system to monitor the implementation of the policy, so that students requiring academic help receive the needed assistance.

Retention as a policy for success defies its' purpose and dooms the student for failure! *Intensive intervention services* designed to help at risk students at all grade levels should be implemented *as an alternative to retention*!

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